



Cooking With Herbs and Spices

Using Seasonings in a Paleo Friendly Kitchen



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Uses of Culinary Herbs and Spices

The old saying, “Variety is the spice of life” is equally applicable to your diet. Life certainly becomes more interesting when there is variety in your meals, with foods that carry the delicate flavours and aromas of different herbs and spices.

Herbs and spices have always been a part of the human story from the earliest beginnings of civilisation. Egyptian tombs more than 4,000 years old have been found with traces of anise, marjoram, cumin and other herbs and spices. Ancient Europe found many uses of rosemary as a meat preservative. Herbs were used extensively in medicine and many plants became essential medicines, but also found uses as food flavourings and preservatives.

In recent years, the popularity of fresh herbs has grown. Chefs look to herbs to enhance their dishes or to produce new and different dishes for their menus. People are learning, from television cook shows and other sources, how to use herbs and spices and with what types of foods they can be used.

The word herb refers to plants that do not have woody stems and usually found in cooler climates. Herbs come from the leafy and fleshy parts of these plants, and are used in fresh or dried form. They lend flavour and provide nutrients to nearly every kind of food and cuisine, including processed meats, breads, sauces, salads and soups. Herbs have low content of essential oils, which makes their flavours delicate and subtle.

The word spices refers to vegetative substances such as flowers, buds, seeds, fruits, bark, and roots of plants and trees, most of which grow in tropical and semitropical climates. Spices have high content of essential oils, which makes them highly aromatic.

The basic rule in the use of herbs and spices is to make them enhance the flavour of the main ingredient. How this is done depends, in the final analysis, on the cook. They can be used by themselves or in a combination of two or more. It is really up to the cook’s flair for experimentation.

Indeed, cooking with herbs and spices can provide a flavour of adventure to any meal. Many herbs seem to give off their best flavours when mixed into foods that originate from other cultures. You may have noticed how oregano works best in Greek or Italian dishes, ginger in many Asian recipes, or tarragon in French food. Dill may give you the aroma of Swedish cooking, while combinations of cilantro, garlic, and cayenne evoke images of Thai cuisine.

Herbs and spices perform much better when kept relatively fresh. Age, heat, and exposure to air result in them lose their flavour. Culinary prowess can become much more pronounced with fresh herbs and spices.

Generally, herb flavours are maximised when you add them within the last few minute of cooking. This is dependent on the meal you are cooking however. Often, the longer they are exposed to heat, the less potent their flavours will become. Herbs are often able to release their flavours better when soaked 10-30 minutes in some of the liquid that will be used in the recipe.

Some herbs have strong flavours, while others are more delicate. But very few of them are able to retain their flavour when cooked for a long time. Bay and rosemary however, may be more pleasant when allowed to simmer longer.

Oregano and thyme flavours remain robust even when cooked down to nothing, yet are equally pleasing when used fresh. For some dishes, oregano and thyme may be added early to allow the flavours to mellow and then recharge the aroma with a light sprinkling of fresh leaves just before serving.

Other herbs simply disappear when cooked too long, such as fresh basil, dill, fennel and marjoram. It is best to wait until the last minute before adding them.

To bring out the flavour in seeds, such as coriander, fennel and caraway seeds, you may like to toast them lightly before coarsely crushing and adding them to your cooking.

Quick Tip: If the recipe you are cooking calls for bay leaves or herbs that should be removed before serving, you can place them into a stainless-steel tea ball or in bundled-up layers of cheesecloth. Attach the tea-ball or bundle to the pot handles for quick removal.



Herbs, Spices and Combinations

The list below is not exhaustive, but the more popular herbs and spices to cook with are included.





Herbs

Basil

Basil has a sweet, minty, and mild peppery flavour. Basil comes from the mint family and is very suitable for chicken and fish recipes. Basil is very popular in Italian cooking; it is a perfect addition to many light salads and serves as the basic ingredient in pesto.

Key nutrients: vitamins A, B1, B3, C, calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, manganese, pantothenic acid, and folate.

Bay Leaves

Bay leaves (also called laurel and sweet bay) are the dried leaves of the evergreen laurel tree. Bay leaves have a woody, mildly astringent flavour with a hint of mint. Bay leaves provide wonderful flavours to meats, fish, poultry, stews, and vegetables. Bay leaves should be removed before serving.

Key nutrients: calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, manganese, vitamins A, B2, B3, B6, C, and E, folate and fibre.

Chervil / Coriander

Chervil has aromatic lacy leaves that bring to food a sweet, anise-like flavour. Much like parsley, chervil can be used to garnish or flavour almost any dish. It combines well with other herbs. Cooking begins to destroy the flavour of chervil, so it should be added at the last minute, instead.

Key nutrients: calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, manganese, vitamins A, B1, B2, B3, B6, C, and E, folate, and fibre.

Dill (also dill seed)

Dill has a slightly bitter taste and unusual but quite fascinating fragrance. Dill can be used to flavour salads (especially Greek salads), fish, and lamb. Dill is a natural preservative, making it a very welcome flavouring when making pickles.

Key nutrients: calcium, phosphorus, sodium, potassium, iron, vitamins A, B1, B2, and B3.

Chives

Chives, with slender, rushlike leaves, impart a mild onion-like flavour. Chives make the perfect garnish because of their delicate flavour and bright green colour. You can consider chives as a mild substitute for onions when thinking of herbs. Chives can perk up salads, soups, broths, stews, omelets, scrambled eggs, and cooked vegetables. For a final touch of decorative flair, place chives blossoms on your salads.

Key nutrients: a significant amount of vitamin C, plus calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, manganese, vitamins A, B, B2, B3, B6, and E, pantothenic acid, folate, and fibre.

Marjoram

Marjoram is a perennial herb of the mint family. It has a pleasing fragrant aroma and a flavour similar to thyme — for which reason they are typically used in combination or to replace the other. Both the fresh and dried leaves are used as herbs. Marjoram can be added to almost every dish, and usually with egg dishes, lamb, poultry, sausages, soups, stews, and vegetables. Its flavour is lost very quickly in cooking, so add marjoram immediately before serving.

Key nutrients: calcium, copper, iron, phosphorus, potassium magnesium, manganese, vitamins A, B6, C, and K, folate, and dietary fibre.

Mint

Mint refers to over 3,200 species of aromatic perennial plants of the family Labiatae. More specifically, mint refers to members of the genus *Mentha* — peppermint and spearmint. Spearmint is the preferred mint for lamb as well as for iced tea. Mint can also be used in soups, stews, fish and meat sauces. Mint is important to some dishes. For example, in England, lamb without mint sauce would be unthinkable.

Key nutrients (peppermint): phosphorus, zinc, calcium, iron, magnesium, potassium, copper, manganese, vitamins A, B2, B3, C, folate, and dietary fibre.

Rosemary

Rosemary comes from an evergreen shrub of the mint family. It brings a pungent, aromatic, and slightly bitter taste to dishes. Rosemary is good with soups, on broiled steaks, or with other meat dishes, sauces and vegetables.

Key nutrients: calcium, iron, manganese, magnesium, potassium, copper, vitamins A, B6, C, folate and dietary fibre.

Parsley

Parsley belongs to the family Umbelliferae, which includes carrot, celery, fennel and dill. Fresh and dried leaves of parsley are often added to fish and fish sauces, meats, sauces, soups, and vegetables. Lacy sprigs of parsley often accompany a restaurant meal, where it usually remains uneaten. This is unfortunate, because parsley is nutritious.

Key nutrients: good source of protein, vitamins B1, B2, B3, and B6, pantothenic acid, phosphorus and zinc; and a very good source of vitamins A, C, and K, calcium, iron, magnesium, potassium, copper, manganese, folate and dietary fibre.

Oregano

Oregano, a member of the mint family, is the name given to more than 40 species of perennial plants whose dried leaves impart a particular flavour to food. Oregano produced in cooler climates is not as potent as those originating from warmer climates such as Southern Italy.

Oregano is used extensively in Italian cooking and can be added to cheese dishes, chili beans, fish, gravies, meats, sauces, sausage, salads, and soups. It can be used fresh or dried.

Key nutrients: potassium, copper, calcium, iron, magnesium, manganese, vitamins A, B6, C, E (alpha tocopherol), and K, folate, and dietary fibre.

Sage

Sage also belongs to the mint family. The leaves are often dried and available in whole, rubbed, or ground form and can also be found in some mixed spice combinations. Sage is used for baked fish, meats and meat stuffing, sausages, and sauces.

Key nutrients: calcium, iron, magnesium, manganese, copper, vitamins A, B3, B6, C, E, and K, folate and dietary fibre.

Spices

Allspice

Allspice gets its name from the combination of cinnamon, pepper, juniper, and clove in the flavour of this dried, unripe berry of a Caribbean evergreen tree. Sweet foods seem more savoury when whole or ground berries of allspice are added. Add some whole allspice berries when cooking stock or stew; ground allspice is great in mulled cider, fruit desserts, and pumpkin pies. Allspice is also known as pimento and Jamaica pepper.

Key nutrients: calcium, vitamins A, B1, B2, B6, C, and E, iron magnesium, manganese, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, and folate, and dietary fibre.

Anise

Anise is a member of the parsley family. It has a highly aromatic, sweet flavour that often tastes similar to licorice. It is also called star anise and Chinese anise. Use whole or ground anise seeds in most Asian dishes, soups, and in dessert recipes such as spice cakes, cookies, fruits and others.

Key nutrients: calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, manganese, zinc, vitamin A, B1, B2, B3, B6, C, E, pantothenic acid, and dietary fibre.

Caraway

Caraway seeds (actually dried fruits of the caraway plant) impart a sharp, slightly bitter flavour with sweetish undertones on meat dishes, soups, salads, stews, sauerkraut and cakes. The flavour goes especially well with apples, pork, duck and goose. The caraway root can be eaten as a vegetable, while caraway seed oil works nicely in flavouring meats.

Key nutrients: calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, manganese, vitamins A, B1, B2, B3, B6, C and E, folate, and dietary fibre.

Cassia

Cassia refers to the aromatic bark of *Cinnamomum cassia*, sometimes called Chinese cinnamon. True cinnamon has a much thinner bark than cassia bark. Cassia has a more pungent and less delicate flavour than cinnamon. But ground cassia bark is not easy to distinguish from cinnamon, so cheap cassia spice is commonly substituted for the more expensive real cinnamon.

The stick (dried bark) cassia can be used to impart flavour to dishes, such as punches. Remove the stick before serving. Ground cassia is best used in combination with allspice, nutmeg, and cloves for spicing mincemeat, curries, pilafs, meat dishes, desserts, and cakes.

Key nutrients (ground cassia): calcium, manganese, iron, vitamin K, and a very good source of dietary fibre.

Cinnamon

True cinnamon is an evergreen bush or tree which can reach heights of 9m (30ft), but the cultivated tree is regularly pruned to maintain a shrub height that facilitates harvesting. The bark of the lower branches are peeled and dried in the sun. Both stick (the dried bark) and ground cinnamon are used extensively as a spice.

Because cinnamon flavour is more delicate than cassia, it makes a better flavouring for sweet dishes, cakes, and cookies. Essential oil is also distilled from the shoots and bark. Cooks in Arab countries put stick cinnamon in curries and mutton stew, which creates a distinctive combination of subtle, pleasant flavours.

Key nutrients: calcium, manganese, iron, vitamin K, and dietary fibre.

Cardamom

Cardamom is a member of the ginger family. Its flavour is grapefruit-like and floral, with a hint of menthol. Cardamom is used extensively in Scandinavian and Indian cuisines. It is often used in holiday breads, fruits, and sweet vegetables such as winter squash, pumpkin, and sweet potatoes. Use it also when making homemade curry powder.

Key nutrients: calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, manganese, vitamin C, vitamins B1, B2, B3, and dietary fibre.

Pepper

Peppers from vines belong to a different family than the red or capsicum peppers. Black pepper is the dried, unripe berry, or peppercorn, of a tropical perennial vine. White pepper is milder in flavour. Both peppers are universally popular. They may be bought as whole peppercorns, as well as cracked, and coarsely or finely ground.

Pepper has universal applications to virtually all dishes, depending on the taste preferences of the consumers.

Key nutrients: calcium, iron, copper, manganese, magnesium, potassium, vitamins C and K, and dietary fibre.

Ginger

Ginger is one of the best known of all spices, and is now grown all over the tropics. Ginger is available in both fresh and dried forms. The dried is more spicy and intense in flavouring, and the fresh is more subtle.

Ginger is used in numerous foods including beverages, biscuits, cakes, fish, sauces, and spice mixtures.

It is used mostly in sweet preparations in European and North American cooking, but the Orient uses it extensively for chutney, fish, meat, and pickles.

Key nutrients (ground ginger): iron, magnesium, potassium, selenium, manganese, vitamins B6 and E, and dietary fibre. The ginger root also contains vitamin C and traces of copper.

Saffron

Saffron spice consists of dried stigmas gathered by hand from the flower of the saffron bulb, which is a low-growing perennial, possibly native to Greece, Asia Minor, and Iran. It is very expensive, because one pound of saffron requires about 225,000 stigmas.

Saffron is used to impart flavour and colour (yellow) and is essential in some European dishes such as the well-known Spanish chicken-rice dish, "Arroz Con Pollo."

Key nutrients: iron, potassium, magnesium, manganese, vitamins B6 and C.

Mustard (seeds)

Mustard, a member of the cabbage family, is grown for its leaves, which are used in salads and consumed as greens, and its pungent seeds. Mustard seeds when dry are odourless and flavourless. When it is mixed with water, a chemical reaction produces an essential oil that accounts for the hot taste of mustard. This essential oil is easily destroyed during cooking, so it is best to add mustard at the last minute.

Whole mustard seeds are used as flavouring during pickling and to add pungency to many foods, including pickles, meats, and salads.

Powdered dry mustard produces a sharp, hot flavour when it is moistened. Make sure to use the resulting paste immediately. This is used for roast beef, mustard pickles, sauces, and gravies.

Prepared mustard is a mixture of powdered mustard with salt, spices, and lemon juice, with wine or vinegar to preserve the mustard's pungency.

Mustard leaves are harvested while tender and eaten as greens. Mustard greens are an excellent source of vitamins A, B, and C.

Key nutrients (powdered mustard): calcium, iron, magnesium phosphorus, manganese, and significant amounts of selenium, and dietary fibre.

Nutmeg

Nutmeg comes from an evergreen tree that produces a yellow plum-like fruit, inside of which is the seed that is known as nutmeg. A membrane covering the kernel provides mace, another spice.

Ground nutmeg is highly suitable for sweet foods and goes very well with meat, spinach, sweet potatoes, and vegetables.

Key nutrients: significant manganese content, and dietary fibre, but it is high in saturated fat.

Paprika

Paprika comes from sweet red pepper. The pepper pods are dried and ground, after removing the core and seeds to reduce the pungency. Paprika is the national spice of Hungary and is used extensively in Spanish cooking.

Hungarian goulash is nothing without paprika. The spice is used to add flavour to chicken, fish, meats, tomato catsup, and tomato juice.

Key nutrients: magnesium phosphorus, copper, manganese, iron, potassium, vitamins A, B1, B2, B3, B6, C and E.



Combinations

The art of cooking essentially involves the skill of combining herbs. It is typical to favour only one or two strongly flavoured herbs and spices in a dish, but the following combinations make for interesting exceptions.

Bouquet Garni

Simply tie parsley, thyme, and bay in a bunched bouquet garni, to add flavour to stocks, soups, sauces and stews.

Bouquets garnis are little bundles of aromatic herbs and spices. The idea is to contain the herbs so that only their flavour (no flecks or fragments) will permeate the food. The bouquet garni can be made in various ways: fresh sprigs of several herbs tied up in a string; fresh or dried herbs tied in a cheesecloth bag, or stuffed in a stainless-steel tea ball; or fresh or dried herbs clamped by a string between two stalks of celery. Always make the string long enough so that the loose end can be tied to the pot handle — this facilitates easy retrieval and removal.

The classic contents of bouquets garnis are parsley, thyme, and bay. Peppercorns, whole allspice, whole cloves, celery leaf, tarragon, or marjoram are occasionally added. You may want to come up with your own bouquet ideas. For instance, a combination of lemon peel, whole peppercorns, and garlic can impart interesting flavours to simmering vegetables. Or, a bundle of cinnamon stick, orange and/or lemon peel, and nutmeg can be used to flavour warm apple cider.

You can make bouquet garnis in advance in cheesecloth bags and freeze them. Add the bundle to simmering food directly from the freezer.

Fines Herbes

Fines herbes consists of chervil, chives, parsley, and tarragon. The combination is often stirred into salads, sauces, and vegetables.

Fines herbes maybe freshly minced and added to omelets, sautés and other recipes at the very last minute of cooking. Fines herbes are especially alluring because of the freshness of the herbs and the harmonious combination that creates a satisfying flavour.

Quatre Epices

Quatre epices simply means “four spices” and is used in French haute cuisine to flavour roast meats, poultry, hardy vegetables, or desserts. The four spices are a ground combination of any of the following: cloves, mace, nutmeg, ginger, cinnamon, black pepper, or white pepper. Quatre epices without peppers are used to spice pumpkin pies.

Curry Powder

There is no curry plant used to produce curry powder. Actually, curry powder is a combination of many aromatic spices including coriander seed, cumin seed, nutmeg, mace, cardamom seed, white mustard seed, black mustard seed, turmeric, fenugreek seed, chilli, ginger, peppercorns (white or black), garlic, allspice, cinnamon, cayenne, and fennel seed. These are all ground into powder.

Curry powder is a necessity in East Indian cuisine and has been imported to Southeast Asian recipes. Thai curries (except for Thai Muslim curry) do not include sweet spices like cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and mace and include lots of fresh basil. Thai curry powders are commonly combined with a liquid and used as pastes.

To enliven its exceptional aroma, curry powder should always be heated before eating.

Chilli Powder

Chilli powder is a combination of ground spices and herbs that always contain dried chilli plus a selection of garlic powder, oregano, allspice, cloves, cumin seed, coriander seed, cayenne, black pepper, turmeric, mustard seed, and paprika. As with all dried spice and herb combinations, chilli powder is best when ground as needed and heated before eating. If you must make chilli powder ahead, store it in a tightly covered glass jar kept in a cool, dark place.

Chinese Five Spice Powder

Chinese five spice powder is a dried, ground combination of Szechuan peppercorns, cinnamon, cloves, fennel, and star anise. The combination is used for seasoning and as a condiment. Five-spice powder provides its best flavours when ground as needed and heated before serving. If you're using five-spice powder as a condiment, toast it first in a dry sauté pan. If you must store five-spice powder, keep it untoasted in a tightly covered glass jar in a cool, dark place.

Pickling Spice

Pickling spice typically contains dill weed and/or dill seed along with any of the following: dried chilli, mustard seed, bay, allspice, white or black peppercorns, cinnamon, cloves, coriander seed, turmeric, cardamom, ginger, celery seed, garlic, mace, and nutmeg. The basic idea is to choose spices according to the item you want to pickle. Cucumber pickles, for instance, may be enhanced by dill, mustard seed, celery seed, garlic, and black peppercorns. While you could combine cinnamon, nutmeg, bay, and peppercorns to pickle carrots.

Garam Masala

Garam Masala is a northern Indian spice usually added to meat dishes as a final seasoning. Garam Masala combines cardamom pods, bay leaves, black peppercorns, cumin seeds, coriander seeds, cinnamon stick and cloves together and ground to a fine powder. Garam Masala is best stored in a small airtight container until needed.

Growing and Storing Your Own Herbs & Spices

A reliable way to assure yourself of a ready supply of herbs, especially those not easy to obtain and/or those that are most tasty when used fresh, is to grow them in your own herb garden. All you need is some space and good soil for a utilitarian garden of kitchen herbs. Once planted, herbs pretty much take care of themselves.

The best time to gather herbs is midmorning, after the dew is gone but before the heat of the sun has caused essential oils to evaporate. If you're harvesting herbs for drying (or other preservation methods), try to time it for the most desirable conditions. The ideal weather is two consecutive days of sun after a day of deep watering or soaking rain.

This ensures the leaves will be chock full of nutrients and essential oils

Herbs and spices lose their flavours and aromatic substances soon after crushing or grinding. This only means it is important to pick fresh herbs and, in the case of dried herbs and spices, to grind or crush them, as close as possible to the time of actual use.

Before you prepare herbs for longer storage, it helps to place the cut stems in a jar of water and put the fresh-picked herbs in the refrigerator for an hour or two before cleaning them.



Health Benefits

Health Benefits

Many herbs used in the kitchen have also been used for medicinal purposes. This is a testament to the health benefits that herbs and spices can provide. The nutrient contents of popular herbs and spices are loaded with vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, which strengthen your immune system and help protect against diseases. A more detailed view of vitamin and mineral content has been provided above.

It may come as a surprise that a single teaspoon of chilli powder or paprika has enough vitamin A (in the form of beta-carotene) to fulfil 16% of your daily requirement. Many culinary herbs and spice also possess distinct antibacterial properties, while three of them — garlic, oregano and allspice — are powerful enough to fight virtually all microbes.

Scientific studies have shown that these antibacterial properties become most effective when several herbs and spices are combined. The various combinations developed by many cultures reflect this antibacterial synergy. Researchers have observed that the herbs and spices with the most potent antioxidant properties originate from warmer climates. This reconciles with the fact that microbes and pests that spoil foods thrive faster in higher temperatures.

Beyond the science, however, you can notice that flavourful foods — or even just the anticipation of flavour-filled meal as suggested by alluring appearance and enticing smells provoked by herbs and spices — stimulate saliva secretions in your mouth. Saliva contains an enzyme important in digestion of starches; it moistens and softens food for easier swallowing. The flavours also trigger the stomach to produce gastric juices necessary for digesting your meal. The more appetising the flavours in your food, the better your digestion will be. With more efficient digestion, you will be better nourished and healthier.

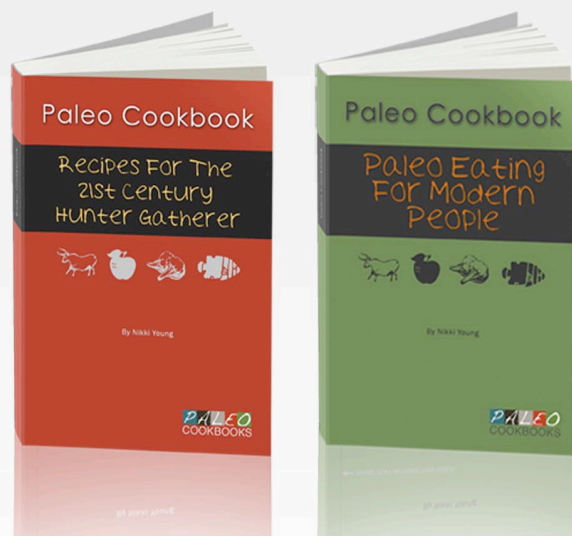
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